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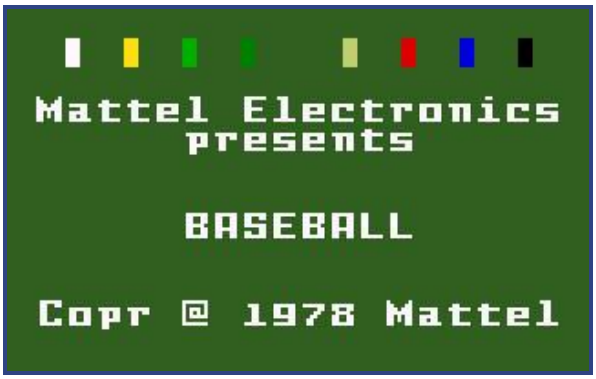
TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME

Give Me Total Control!

by Tom Zjaba

Date of Release: 1978	Developer: Mattel, Inc.	Publisher: Mattel, Inc.	Designer:



If you look at today's baseball games, you see incredible graphics, immersive sound, and options out the wazoo. From the photo realistic stadiums, all recreated to the tiniest detail, to the barking of the hot dog vendors, you have totally superior baseball games to the ones we played in our youth. The players all look like their real life counterparts and each player is designed to hit, field, run and pitch as they would in real life. With all this innovation, what more could you ask for? Total control, that's what!

While modern baseball games are far superior in almost every facet of the game, they still take a back seat to the Intellivision baseball game. No matter how gorgeous the graphics are, no matter how wonderful the announcers sound, you still have limited control over your fielders. Sure, you can catch and throw the ball with the best of them, but who has control over which fielder will be catching that ball or running down a weak grounder? The computer is the one who calls the shots. With all this realism and innovations, they cannot give you the choice like the Intellivision could. When a ball was hit to the left side of the infield, you could decide if the shortstop or the third baseman would have a better chance of getting to the ball. When a shot is hit down the gap, you decided if the right fielder or center fielder would run it down. It wasn't some computer deciding by some obscure formula, who will go after the ball -- it was you! If you flubbed the play, you could only blame yourself. You couldn't say "well, if the computer gave me the shortstop, I would have made that play" like you can with a modern game. This made the game so much better, in terms of fielding. It took skill to learn the game and to master it.

The biggest reason for this is the keypad. The new game systems only have a handful of buttons and they are spread all over the joystick/joypad/controller or whatever they call them these days. But the Intellivision had its telephone styled keypad, with plenty of buttons for the whole team. With a press of a button, you could easily determine who you wanted to get the ball. You could be crazy and have your catcher run all the way to the outfield to shag a ball if you desired. You had total control and it made the game great! No other game, save Colecovision Baseball, allowed this type of control. Not on the Nintendo, not on the PlayStation, and not on the computer (at least that I am aware of). And until we get a speedy voice recognition setup, it is doubtful that we will ever see it again.

So while the Intellivision may not offer more than one stadium, and maybe it only has two teams of nameless, identical players, it does offer something the new games cannot and possibly never will. It gives you choice and control. And isn't video games about having both of these? So the next time your buddies show you some hot, new baseball game and go on endlessly about how incredible it is, ask them if they have total control? And when they look at you with a puzzled look, you can smile with the satisfaction that your lowly Intellivision is still superior in one aspect of the game (one very important aspect of the game!) CGM

Doin' the Slide 'n Shoot

An all but dead genre today, so-called "slide-and-shoot" games were extremely popular during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Pioneered by Taito's legendary *Space Invaders* (1978), these types of games feature a ship (or other object) that fires upward at aliens (or other objects) while moving along the bottom of the screen. *Space Invaders* single-handedly created a new type of gaming experience and similar games began popping up in the arcades like zits on a teenage chocoholic.

Some of the better arcade games to come from this previously untapped fount of shooting goodness include *Galaxian* in 1979, *Moon Cresta* and *Phoenix* in 1980, and *Galaga* in 1981. *Centipede* (1980) and *Gorf* (1981) were also heavily influenced by *Space Invaders*, but those games, great as they may be, aren't technically "slide-and-shoot" games since they let you maneuver your shooter around the bottom ¼ of the playfield as opposed to restricting your movement to a straight horizontal line.

When *Space Invaders* finally hit the Atari 2600 in January of 1980, sales of the venerable system skyrocketed. This was the first time that an arcade title was licensed for use on a home system, and gamers everywhere rejoiced at the concept of playing an honest to goodness coin-op game on their television set. With its 112 variations, rock solid gameplay, and popular name, *Space Invaders* was a smashing success in the home, just as it had been in the arcades. The Atari 2600 would go on to have a plethora of excellent "slide-and-shoot" games in its library, including Atari's *Phoenix* (1982) and *Galaxian* (1983), Imagic's *Demon Attack* (1982), and Activision's *Spider Fighter* and *MegaMania* (1982).

While the Atari 2600 is hands down *the* console to own when it comes to *Space Invaders*-type games, the Intellivision, a system known primarily for its authentic sports simulations and in-depth strategy games, has a handful (assuming you have six fingers) of "slide-and-shoot" games, all of which deserve some notice. These include: Mattel's *Space Armada* (1981), *Astrosmash* (1981), and *Buzz Bombers* (1983); Imagic's *Demon Attack* (1982); Coleco's *Carnival* (1982); and Activision's *Beamrider* (1983).

A blatantly obvious *Space Invaders* clone (Mattel's lawyers at the time claimed that the copyright for *Space Invaders* was not properly protected), *Space Armada* is a clunky version of the aforementioned classic with only four rows of invaders and just two modes of play (Practice and Game). The controls could use a shot of WD-40, but the game is challenging (some of the enemies become invisible in later levels), and it's cool to be able to play *Space Invaders* on your Intellivision, even if it is not the real thing.

Space Armada

Astrosmash is a smashing game that brings elements of *Asteroids* to the genre as you must blast away at a killer asteroid shower (as well as bombs, missiles, and flying saucers). The cool thing about this game, aside from the fact that it is a fast, furious and highly entertaining shooter, is that you lose points (or even a laser base) when objects get past your ship. Mattel's M Network division released this game for the Atari 2600 as *Astroblast*. Although not as graphically sophisticated as *Astrosmash*, *Astroblast* does have an advantage in that you can play the game using Atari's paddle controllers.

Mattel's answer to *Centipede*, *Buzz Bombers* features bees and honeycombs instead of centipedes and mushrooms. The bees, which are nicely rendered, work their way down the playfield to the tune of "Flight of the Bumblebee." You must shoot the bees before they reach the bottom of the screen or they will pollinate flowers, which multiply and restrict the movement of the spray can you control. A hummingbird will help you from time to time by removing some of the screen-cluttering honeycombs. Ammunition is limited, so shoot sparingly. Although there wasn't much buzz about the game at the time of its release, *Buzz Bombers* is nevertheless very enjoyable.

Astro Smash

Arguably better than the brilliant Atari 2600 version, *Demon Attack* for the Intellivision is similar to *Phoenix* in that after every few waves of winged creatures you get to battle a giant enemy. In *Phoenix*, the "boss" character is the mother ship. In *Demon Attack* (Intellivision version only), you'll face Pandemonium, the flagship of the Demon Armada. This brightly colored flagship blankets the sky beautifully with its fiery grin, slanted eyes, and devilish horns. Regardless of which version you play (the game is available for numerous consoles and home computers), *Demon Attack* is an intense shooter that will please even the most demanding of gamers.

A nice adaptation of the arcade semi-classic, *Carnival* is about what you'd expect: a blockier, harder to control rendition of the original. Like its arcade and ColecoVision counterparts, *Carnival* places heavy emphasis on the aiming and timing of your shots. Strategy is also involved as it is important to conserve ammo. You should shoot the rotating flags as soon as you can because they are hard to hit and additional targets will keep coming out as long as at least one flag remains. For extra points, you should shoot the ducks and other targets before they leave the top row. Although cuter and cuddlier than most hardcore shooter fans are accustomed to, *Carnival* is an addicting game that will challenge and entertain most anyone.

Unlike *Space Invaders* and most other "slide-and-shoot" games, the ship in *Beamrider* cannot move in minute increments as it must always stop on one of five vertical beams on a grid. This element of design is a unique twist on the genre and, thanks to a fine programming job by creator David Rolfe, it doesn't bog down gameplay one iota. It simply creates new challenges. *Beamrider* has a smooth learning curve, good controls, unpredictable enemies, and a nifty, pseudo-3D look. Like most games bearing the Activision label, *Beamrider* is a winner.

The Intellivision may not be the first place to go when you are looking for "slide-and-shoot" games, but it should at least be considered. It may only have six examples of this type of shooter, but they are all challenging and entertaining, especially *Astrosmash* and *Demon Attack*.

-Brett Weiss

Qreating Q*bert

by Earl Green

Graphic by **Jason**Rhoades

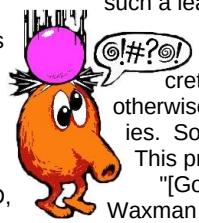
It's not too often one participates in the creation of one of the most lovable -- to say nothing of *marketable* -- characters in early videogame history. Even when *Q*bert* was brand new, it was a hit; and licensees paid through the nose, if you will, for the rights to create everything from Saturday morning cartoons to toys to T-shirts. Not bad for a critter whose creator once enjoyed cartoons himself.

Jeff Lee, an artist and designer at Gottlieb/Mylstar, is fully capable of claiming at least some of the credit in creating *Q*bert.* After all, it was he who first set pencil to paper and drew a round character with two eyes, two legs, and an enormous nose…but Jeff had *always* wanted to create a character that others would enjoy.

"Three interests of my youth prepared me for that path. First would be art. From kindergarten on, I've had some talent in that field. I went to a Catholic grammar school, which had very little in the way of art instruction, but I always drew for pleasure. I read the comic strips (Peanuts and Andy Capp were my particular favorites at that time) from early on and still do, as well as every sort of comic book (Archie, DC, Carl Barksian, Disney's...later on Mad Magazine, underground comics and the Lampoon). Like many kids of my generation, I watched a lot of TV and enjoyed animated cartoons, Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera...whatever was on."

Jeff's fascination with that medium inspired him to draw his own cartoons, comics, and animation flipbooks -- featuring is own characters. "Like most every artist, I copied from the masters of those media which interested me as a leg-up to creating more original work."

But of course, it would seem unlikely for someone with a future in the videogame industry to get there without an interest in games. "Card games, board games, yard games," Jeff recalls, and he got an early start by helping to launch a game which *didn't* require a joystick. "Back in the 60s I had a few of the American Heritage war games as well as some early Avalon Hill games. Later we played a lot of Risk, particularly in college. While at the University of Illinois, I designed and built two board games in art classes. In the following years, I was reintroduced to Avalon Hill war games and fell into a group who regularly played them, as well as backgammon, cards, D&D, miniatures warfare and Traveler. In fact, one of those guys, David Tennes, created a card game, OD, which I illustrated and was published by Avalon Hill, though it was not a big seller."



Jeff also admits to being "an avid reader," citing science fiction, fantasy, adventure and history as his favorite genres. "There is a fair amount of overlap between these three pastimes," he notes, "and I suppose that's what prepared me for the game field, although the direct connection into the industry was my friend Richard Tracy, an artist. But the basis of our friendship was music. He plays piano (beautifully) and I play guitar and mandolin (not so beautifully) and we spent many hours in the 70s playing music together."

*"I think when Warren had the colors of the diamonds changing as Q*bert hopped around the pyramid, we knew we had a unique game with great commercial potential."*

But that connection was responsible for Jeff's arrival at Gottlieb/Mylstar in the 80s, where he'd find himself working in an industry in which he had already conducted plenty of field research. "I had been supervising an internal graphics office at Triton College for several years and freelancing on the side. The college nearby was a driving range with an arcade, in which they had *Space Invaders* and few other early 80s machines. I used to drop by after work . . . videogames were just becoming popular, although my initial exposure to them was probably at bars in Lincoln Park, where my friends and I prowled in our bachelor days," he recalls. "We played quite a bit of *Asteroids* at that time."

"Richard Tracy, my pianist friend, had become the art director at Gottlieb Pinball. He had two artists, David Moore and Terry Doerzaph, producing the backglasses and playfield art. Then Gottlieb, owned by Columbia Pictures, decided to jump on the video bandwagon." When asked to reflect on why a major movie studio would make such a leap, Jeff has his own theories. "This may be because the videogames were direct competition for the discretionary dollars which young males otherwise might spend on pinball and movies. So they went all out in this endeavor." This proved to be Jeff Lee's lucky break.

"[Gottlieb] hired Howie Rubin and Ron Waxman to head up the division and hire the needed staff of hardware and software guys, and converted an auxiliary plant in Bensenville [Illinois] into a video game factory. The main pinball factory was in Northlake. Since Richard was the art director, he had to hire an artist for the video division and I was the lucky guy. I didn't hesitate a moment...this fit in perfectly with my leisure activities and so I gave prompt notice at the college."

While a leap from academia into a new industry with an uncertain future might make some nervous, Jeff commends his bosses at Gottlieb with putting everyone at ease -- and giving them a creative environment in which even the most off-the-wall ideas could flourish. "Howie and Ron really set the tone at the video division. They had the professional backgrounds -- Howie the business end, Ron the engineering -- which, even if they hadn't ever built a videogame enterprise, nonetheless gave them the foundation to do so, bearing in mind that Gottlieb Pinball, with its experience, infrastructure and staff, was there in a huge support role."

"But, beyond that, they were somewhat off-beat," Jeff remembers. "Howie is tall and animated, had a beard and was only button-down when he paid Columbia a call. He's a born schmoozer, but in the best sense of the word. Sometimes his mind seems to jump around like a pinball between pop-bumpers, which used to drive some guys nuts. He rubs some people wrong (don't we all?), but I've always admired his warmth and enthusiasm and consider him creative."

Of Ron Waxman, Jeff says, "Ron is rather a contrast with Howie, despite the beard and informality. He's shorter and quite obese, with a melancholic face and dark, mournful eyes. He is equipped with a penetrating mind and dry, ironic wit. He has gruff demeanor and cuts through the crap. Still, he's a schmoozer in his own way...spending hours with the software and hardware guys and, beyond his technical expertise, making creative game play suggestions."

"All in all, the atmosphere at the Bensenville plant was loose, creative and hard-working," Jeff says, summing it up. "It helped, too, that we were a distance removed from the pinball plant in Northlake - there were subtle tensions between us and the old-guard pinball guys. I believe that the people really enjoyed the work. I know I did. Others say it was the best job they ever had and I, for my part, agree. Why not? We were mostly young, reasonably well-paid, and working in an industry in its infancy and which was, at the time, a growing national obsession."

But *in its infancy* are the operative words

in describing the early videogame scene, and Jeff Lee attests to the fact that he and his co-workers were venturing into largely uncharted territory. "None of us artists had produced computer graphics before, so there was no mentoring to be done in that sense. As far as animation went, I had more experience in that field, little enough as it was, than the rest of the art department."

And it just so happened that an experiment in computer graphics led to the creation of a much-loved video game character. A simple pyramid of vaguely three-dimensional cubes led Jeff to imagine what sort of characters would live in that world. One of the characters Jeff created was an armless orange creature with a large nose. But the original idea, titled *Snots and Boogers,* didn't quite fly. It involved Q*bert avoiding the never-ending hail of bouncing balls, and shooting…well…*projectiles* out of his nose to get rid of opponents like Coily the snake.

But then Warren Davis, who did the bulk of the actual programming of Q*bert, added the element of the cubes which changed color when Q*bert hopped on them. Now, rather than simply shooting at endless waves of adversaries, there was a much more game-like goal; and it all seemed to click. "I can't exactly pinpoint when we knew Q*bert was going to do well," Jeff says, looking back. "I think when Warren had the colors of the diamonds changing as Q*bert hopped around the pyramid, we knew we had a unique game with great commercial potential."

And no one saw that potential better than Gottlieb's parent companies. "Gottlieb was on top of the licensing from the start. Remember, they were owned by Columbia Pictures, which was owned by Coca-Cola...and who knows about cross-marketing more than the motion picture and soft drink industries? Gottlieb had been involved in cross-marketing, but from the other end, licensing "name-brand" movies and so on as pinball themes. *Black Hole* and *Rocky* are two movie themes which spring to mind. Once Q*bert play-tested well, they aggressively shopped it around for every possible tie-in. John Von Leeson was the head of the market-research department, and did a lot of those deals. The licensing angle was a big money-maker for them, and Q*bert was a perfect vehicle, with its lovable and wacky cast of characters."

In the end, it may have been the characters, independent from the game itself, which proved to be the greatest commodity. The characters, though well-drawn with their own individual expressions, were defined by their roles in the game. "That, I think, was the key to the licensing success," Jeff reflect. "In the game itself, the personality of the characters is pretty rudimentary and proscribed by the gameplay. The player controls Q*bert, a cute fur ball, and immediately identifies with plucky hero as he attempts to complete his task. The garbled speech lends an air of irreverence to him. And that's about all the personality he is equipped with -- the rest comes from the player's imagination. It's not like Bugs Bunny or Bullwinkle, who have more complex characters defined by speech, mannerisms, and actions in their cartoons."

Continuing on to the bad guys of the piece, Jeff says, "Since all of the other characters in the game work *against* Q*bert, they take on the characteristics of villains. Coily, the snake, is a relentless and deadly, but ultimately dumb, pursuer. Ugg and Wrong-Way look monstrous and evil, but theirs is a casual and opportunistic malevolence. Slick and Sam, on the other hand, are mere mischief makers, exasperating but not fatal."

Playing Q*bert is undeniably addictive once one gets the hang of it, but were the characters the real key? Jeff waxes a little philosophical on this point: "If you look at the other games of the time which did well in terms of licensing, most also had appealing characters who fulfilled similar roles...Pac-Man (a much huger commercial hit) and the ghosts, and Donkey Kong, with Mario and Luigi, a much more enduring dynasty). Interesting that those two games were both of Japanese origin."

Jeff watched from a distance as the characters he helped to create suddenly wound up gracing almost every form of merchandise imaginable. "I was never consulted about the merchandising. My favorite items were some of the plastic figures of the characters, one of which was a wind-up Q*bert, who hopped around. I picked up a bunch of them on clearance about four years later, for about 60 cents each. I can't say there was stuff I couldn't stand, if only because I find it all flattering. Some of it seemed rather unlikely (like odd shaped metal containers featuring pictures of Q*bert or Coily), and some is rather dopey, like a mediocre illustrated kid's book, written by a hack my father's age, who probably had never seen the game."

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But despite this success, it seemed as though Gottlieb didn't quite take the hint. Jeff was given a bonus and a raise, as were other members of the team who worked on Q*bert, but all of them had to remain anonymous. Particularly odd was an interview in the April 1983 issue of Video Games Magazine. The interview was supposedly conducted with "D. Ziner," "J. Walkman" and "R. Teeste" - which were pseudonyms for, respectively, Warren Davis, Gottlieb audio guru David Thiel, and Jeff.

"The anonymity was company policy...the pinball designers were under the same constraint," Jeff recalls of the bizarre interview. "Gottlieb was concerned that talent would be lured away by the competition, much as they hired engineers and designers away from *their* competitors. With so many pinball/video companies in the Chicago area, it wasn't a great upheaval for an employee to change jobs."

At this point, I suddenly remembered a contemporary of Jeff's: Tim Skelly, the programmer of Gottlieb's brilliantly unconventional *Reactor* coin-op, among many other games for other manufacturers (including *Star Castle*). Tim Skelly, whose name was prominently displayed in *Reactor*'s attract mode, and who got to do magazine interviews under his real name. What was the story here? "Tim Skelly was a special case. He was a consultant with a three-game contract, and presumably the terms of his contract entitled him to a designer credit."

And Gottlieb seemed to miss one other particularly important element of Q*bert's success: the extremely marketable characters. "None of the other released Gottlieb/Mylstar videogames had characters as good as Q*bert and crew," Jeff says. "It's not easy to identify with jets and spaceships. If Tim Skelly's *Screwloose* had come out, it might have done well. However, by that time, the industry was waning and *Screwloose* never had the opportunity."

Jeff is now the president of PHLIPart, Inc., a small company specializing in animated flipbook novelties not unlike the ones Jeff created before he launched the videogame phase of his career.

But despite the fact that Gottlieb has vanished into videogame history, and everyone involved with the company is now scattered across the country working for numerous companies, Q*bert has stuck around -- and has even been reborn.

"My son Jesse received that game as a gift from my proud mom," Jeff says of Hasbro/Atari's remake of *Q*bert*. "He was irked, as was I, that I received no acknowledgement in the credits. Though in a way, that's just like old times! Anyway, the arcade version on the PlayStation disc seems to be a good replica...maybe they emulated the hardware and used the original code, sound and graphics. And the other variants were nice...I wish we could have incorporated variants in the original game. I'm glad a new edition came out for all the old fans. Hopefully some kids will enjoy it, too!"

Jeff Lee maintains an interest in the industry, and has a unique vantage point on the history and the future of videogames. "It's an interesting point you raise, that today's generation has been weaned on Nintendo, et al. An art form like motion pictures, grounded in ancient traditions of storytelling and theatre, then wedded to a primitive technology, has been raised by orders of magnitude through technical advancement and more sophisticated sensibilities of filmmakers, themselves weaned on movies. The Golden Age of Arcade Games is really rather like the old silent films...based on traditional gaming theory and wedded to primitive computing and display devices. I wonder what the present and future game makers will create in fifty or a hundred years from now, with their sophisticated sensibilities and superior technology?"

It's a very good point indeed. And one wonders if they'll come up with any games as instantly addictive as Q*bert.

When my brother and I used to fire up the Atari 2600 back in our youth, we had to play it on an old Zenith black and white television left over from my folk's early days of marriage. (Even in the late '70s/early '80s, this TV was an antique.)

Now, this wasn't that big a hassle in the early days of home videogame playing. The Atari itself has a black and white/color switch -- obviously recognizing that many homes still had black and white television sets when it was released. Heck, some games (like Pong)- never looked better than when it was played on a black and white television. There was just something . . . oh I don't know, PURE about it.

As I recall, it was a big deal when Mom and Dad when out to dinner. Matt (my brother) and I would hurriedly disconnect the 2600 from the Zenith and hook it up to the big screen (16 inch) color Quasar. (We were forbidden to have it hooked up for very long. "I've heard those things'll burn up the picture tube!" Dad would say.) Circus Atari with those red and blue balloons was quite a treat for us.

Most of the early Atari carts were programmed to display the game in color or in stark black and white (and heavy gray) when the BW switch was on. It really didn't detract from the games that much and, in fact, enhanced some of them. Matt and I spent many hours playing Black and White Combat, imagining we were "Spy vs. Spy" from Mad Magazine -- he in his black tank, and me in my white tank. I had even pasted a picture of the two pointy-nosed agents on my Combat cart label for authenticity's sake (back when your imagination was just as important as the game itself).

As the years encroached into the mid-to-late '80s, Atari was hitting its zenith -- and hitting ours as well. Matt and I were still stuck with the Zenith, which had the annoying tendency to never break down. It was still "The Boy's Videogame TV."

Sadly, many of the games coming out at the time didn't use the BW/color switch anymore for the purpose it was designed for. Sure, I could use the BW/color switch as a "pause" function on a few carts or to open the shuttle bay doors in Activision's Space Shuttle, but that was the only use that switch had.

Even worse was Atari programmers were now designing games that used color as an integral part of the game. The first time I played Dragonfire, I consistently got my carcass fried as I tried to evade the flaming breath of the speedy, dangerous white dragon. How was I to know this was the fastest critter in the game? They were *all* white to me! I never knew when the game's level had been upped because the dragons never changed color. At least in the original Adventure, the BW switch changed the three dragons to black, white, and grey, making it easier to determine which one was about to clean your clock.

Even worse was Imagic's Moonsweeper. Each moon was color-coded to let you know which ones were novice level, which ones were intermediate level, and which ones were Kiss-Your-Butt-Goodbye level. Each moon swung by my ship, all looking identically, invitingly gray. I wouldn't know what level moon I was on until I descended to the randomly-chosen moon's surface. Sometimes I'd get lucky and it'd be a cakewalk. Most of the time, a zillion saucers would careen across the surface, ending my game in seconds.

The worst one for me was Activision's Pressure Cooker. Although it was a great game with addictive gameplay and a catchy theme song, this game was IMPOSSIBLE to play on a black and white TV. Once you built a burger, you had to drop it down the corresponding color-coordinated chute. Dropping it in the wrong chute subtracted a massive amount of demerits from your score. Six wrong guesses and the game was over. Well, the menu board was color-coded blue, red and green, but on a black and white TV, light gray, ash gray, and charcoal gray. The three colors were impossible to distinguish on the Zenith.

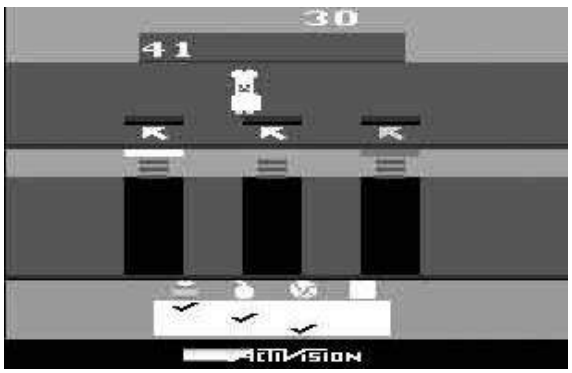
Other games relying on color that drove me into a chromatically-lacking tizzy:

Starpath's Phaser Patrol: Color was used to indicate damage to your ship. I was often obliterated before realizing my shields had been out for 20 minutes.

Atari's Berzerk: The maze level was indicated by the color of the robots. I'd wander into a maze and get shot 17 times before recognizing the higher level I'd stumbled into.

Sega's Star Trek: The screen's border color let you know how much damage your ship had taken. Fortunately, the game started WHOOP-WHOOP-WHOOPing with the Red Alert siren when your damage was a bit too high. I'd start looking for a repair starbase each time that noise blared from the speaker.

Now I'm older and have my own specially-bought TV just for the zillion-color ability of the Playstation 2 and Dreamcast. Yet sometimes I'll fire up the 2600, plug in Combat, flip the BW switch, and blast the hell out of that pesky Black Spy.



"Quick, Tim! Decide! I Haven't Got All Day!!

You Wouldn't Believe it Unless You Saw It...

STRANGE LOCATIONS FOR ARCADE GAMES

By Kyle Snyder

Back in the early 80s, when the arcade gaming fad was at its zenith, you could find machines at nearly every business that welcomed traffic from the local community. You would be hard pressed to walk into a grocery store, restaurant, convenience store, movie theater, or hotel lobby and NOT see at least one quarter munching coin-op, calling to the video game player in all of us.

In fact, it was often not that big of a deal if you couldn't get to an actual arcade for weeks at a time, because all you'd have to do is ride down to the local strip mall, and select from the games placed in the various locations there. For instance, at a small shopping center near where I grew up, the pharmacy had Phoenix and Ms. Pac-Man, the restaurant had a cocktail table of Galaxian, the grocery store had Defender and Centipede, and the laundromat had such video luminaries as Frogger, Asteroids, Donkey Kong, Breakout, and the original Pac-Man. Basically, that strip mall had an arcade and it didn't even know it!

This phenomena stemmed from arcade games becoming "cash cows." If you operated video games, you could put ANY game in nearly any location, and it would rake in tons of coin. (With the possible exception of a marine animal hatchery, but then again, I did say NEARLY any location!) This was clearly demonstrated by games found in slightly "illogical" locations. Not your standard Pizza Huts, Seven Elevens, or Howard Johnson's motel lobbies, but places you would never expect to see coin-ops, yet were pleasantly surprised when you did.

Here's some of my favorite recollections, spied in and around Southern Maryland, and the suburbs of Washington DC in the early 80s.

A Mobil gas station placed uprights of Pac-Man and Turbo in their lobby in the summer of '82. It was very crowded to begin with, but imagine two 300 pound video game cabinets squashing out the available space to sell Twinkies and WD-40!

A year later, a self-service car wash had Asteroids and Space Duel at the end of the row of snack machines. This was in an enclosed portion where the public restrooms were located. So after scrubbing your car, you could hit the lavatory, get a bag of pretzels, and destroy some vector based space debris. AWESOME!!!

A Maryland state park with playgrounds, hiking trails, paddleboats, and lots more, also had a small "general store" where you could get camping supplies. The store owners also offered hikers and outdoorsy folks the chance to play uprights of Defender, Pac-Man, and Deluxe Space Invaders. This was in 1985. Even by 1985, these three games were taking on a "classic" air, especially in respect to the black & white graphics of Invaders. Funnier still, was that this general store was built maybe a quarter mile back in the woods on a hiking trail. I can only imagine how bizarre it must have seemed when the games were installed. Imagine it: a beautiful forest landscape, birds singing, sunshine breaking through the tree branches, and here comes some big hefty dude, pulling a hand truck with a Defender machine tilted back on it. Crazy.

A deli/carry out on the ground floor of an office building had cocktails of Pac-Man and Galaga, and uprights of Ms. Pac-Man, Baby Pac-Man, and Stargate. Odder still was not their obvious love of all things "Pac," but the fact they also had an Asteroids Deluxe placed at the end of the hallway leading to the deli. It was just sitting against the wall between two office doors! At first I though maybe it was in the process of being moved in or out of the deli, but as it was in that spot for several months, and plugged in the whole time, I tend to doubt it.

The Capitol Children's Museum had a Scramble upright in it's cafeteria back in 1981. No doubt this may have been the most interesting "exhibit" of it's day to many children.

A newly built Florida rest stop had Tempest, Defender, Donkey Kong, and Pac-Man lining the back wall of their cafeteria. Spaced rather far apart from one another (maybe 15 feet or so between each game), they were also wisely placed as far away as possible from the food line.

In 1987, I visited a trailer park laundromat that had several machines, among them Gyruss, Carnival, Frogger, Time Pilot, and Pac-Man. Ahhhh... you haven't lived 'til you've reached the 2001 stage on Time Pilot, with the fragrant aromas of Tide and Bounce wafting into your nasal passages.

Sometimes coin-ops even turned up in upscale department stores. Back in '82, a store from the then-profitable, but now defunct Woodward & Lothrop chain featured one machine at each "corner" of the square where all four escalators came together on the second floor. So, as soon as you stepped off an escalator, you could play either Donkey Kong, Galaga, Ms. Pac-Man, or a cabaret model Pac-Man, depending on which escalator you used. Sure made shopping for school clothes more bearable.

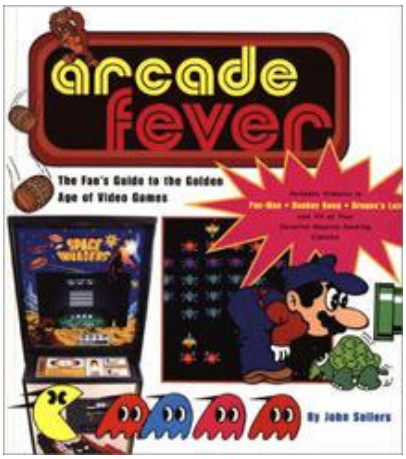
Even Sears got in the act. In 1983, a back room (possibly donated space from the special orders & returns desk) appeared in our Sears with a truly great mini-arcade. About 20 upright machines, and a few cocktail tables at the entrance. Very cramped and dark, and the machines were LOUUUUUD!!! In addition to such expected titles like Ms. Pac-Man and Dig Dug, this was also the first place I encountered and played Robotron:2084. Unfortunately, this magical game room lasted only about six months.

And possibly following that store's lead, in '84, a different Sears store added a Centipede and a Bump N Jump in its waiting room for the enjoyment of those customers that just bought a shiny new Kenmore appliance. Yet unlike the short lived game room, both of these machines remained in place until the mid 90s!

At a dentist's office in Maryland, there was a cocktail Burgertime set on "free play" in the waiting room. Seemed a little ironic. Burgers are usually lumped in with "junk food", and we all know what junk food does to your teeth... Heyyyyyy... maybe the dentist knew what he was subliminally implying ALL ALONG! Anyway, this classic was still there as of 1996, but I went back there last year, and the entire medical building (all 5 stories) was abandoned. Feh!

And an honorary mention, I remember seeing a photo in an 80s National Geographic showing two elderly men seated on opposite sides of a cocktail Ms. Pac-Man. Apparently, this scene was in an old folks home, which had added a few video games and found the grandpas and grandmas liked the competition the games sparked! Goodbye boring checkers cuz Gramps is up to the banana board!

Yes, gone are those days when it was difficult to NOT run into a coin-op game somewhere. These days, it's not a "sure thing" that even long time hold-outs such as pizza parlors or shopping malls will have games. But as long as we remember, we can keep those days alive.



Book Review: **Arcade Fever**
Author: John Sellers
Publisher: Running Press
www.runningpress.com

The book market has seen a sudden glut of books celebrating classic gaming history and lore, from Steven L. Kent's *The First Quarter* to Van Burnham's eagerly-anticipated *Supercade* and now *Arcade Fever*, an irreverent and beautifully-photographed volume by 80s trivia expert John Sellers.

In some ways, I feel that it's Sellers' book which is aimed most squarely at the general population. Kent's *First Quarter* was a concise and well-researched history of the business, and *Supercade* is more of a valentine by, and for, diehard videogame fans. *Arcade Fever*, with its wicked humor, frequent 80s references and opinionated text, is aimed more at the people who *aren't* already losing countless hours of their lives to MAME, the people who *aren't* eagerly seeking the latest homebrew VCS carts, and the people who *aren't* already subscribing to, oh, say, Classic Gamer Magazine.

And in that regard, *Arcade Fever* may do the hobby a service by inspiring some casual fans to become precisely that kind of die-hard fan.

Not that it isn't without its faults, though. At times, Sellers is almost too opinionated about the objects of his interest. He relentlessly hounds *Pooyan* throughout the book, and that's not the only game he blasts. (Hey, call me lame, but I happened to like *Venture.* A lot.) And sometimes his writing style is a little eyebrow-raising, what with his mention that *Tron* – as both video game and movie – caused gamers to have "a massive cream dream." In places, it's a little too reminiscent of that infamous original sales pitch ("It's all about games, you spazz!") of another classic gaming publication which I won't mention here. In many cases it is genuinely funny, but there are a few places where the writing just isn't to my taste, and I find myself longing for the clinical, police-report style of Leonard Herman's *Phoenix*. If anything, I grew to appreciate *Phoenix* a lot more after reading *Arcade Fever*.

The book is illustrated throughout with some awesome photos of classic cabinets and cocktails, along with close-ups of such things as fire buttons, joysticks, coin slots and more filling out space in the margins. The photographer is the real hero of this book; most of the games are illustrated with MAME screen shots, though in some of the vector graphics game that just doesn't pan out. The *Star Wars* screen shots, among others, are hard to see at all.

In a preface to the book, the author notes that he only used MAME to get the screen shots, and offers his view that the use of emulators has an "inherent lameness." Well, John, that's fine, but if not for MAME, Raine and a few dozen other emulators out there, I don't think that there'd be enough interest in retrogaming to get your book published.

The book includes some lighthearted interviews with such celebrities as Nolan Bushnell, Buckner & Garcia, Eugene Jarvis and Walter Day; they're conducted in much the same style as the reviews themselves, so they're more amusing than informative. However, these may be the real gems of the whole book, as the informality allows a little more "bite" to come out of the interviews, such as Jarvis' lamentations about a rabid fan and Bushnell's take on his rivalry wth Ralph Baer.

Overall, I liked *Arcade Fever* -- even if I to have to take issue with the author on some of his content and opinions. He knows his stuff, and sometimes style overcomes substance. But the photos and graphics salvage the book and raise it to a whole new level and make it worth your time.

- Earl Green